

An Appraisal of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*

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The story of the *Iglesia ni Cristo* is that of an aggressive, materially successful, indigenous movement which in a period of fifty years became a religious movement of major significance in the Philippines. In 1963, forty-nine years after its founding, it claimed a membership of 3,500,000, the possession of 1,250 local chapels, and 35 large concrete cathedrals.¹ Its distinctive temples and chapels have become familiar landmarks in many parts of the archipelago.

The success of this religious group is due primarily to its founder, Felix Manalo, who in 1914 started the *Iglesia* on its way and who for 49 years promoted its growth, controlled its ministers and finances, and served as its "Executive Minister." On April 12, 1963, Felix Manalo died, and the mantle of leadership passed to his son Eraño, who had been under the tutelage of his father since he was a small boy. In becoming heir to his father's responsibilities Eraño declared that he would change nothing in the teachings of his father or in the organization of the church.²

History of the Movement

This story centers in the life, the personality, and the aggressiveness of Felix Manalo, the so-called "angel" or "messenger from God referred to in Revelation 7:1,2." Manalo was born May 10, 1886, in Tipas, Taguig, in the province of Rizal. Although he was reared in a devout Roman Catholic home, in 1902, at the age of 16, he declared himself a Protestant after having listened in

¹ Felix M. Caliwag, *Sunday Time's Magazine*, Apr. 28, 1963, p. 22; and R. V. Asis, *The Manila Chronicle Magazine*, Apr. 27, 1963, p. 22.

² Leticia V. Jimenez, *Manila Bulletin*, Apr. 18, 1963.

Manila to an open-air debate between a Roman Catholic priest and an American Protestant missionary. Manalo was impressed with the missionary's knowledge of the Bible and the skillful manner in which he marshaled verses to establish his points. He determined that he would become an ardent student of this "book" which an uncle priest had tried to teach him to despise.³

He joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1904, later attended for a short period classes at the Ellinwood Bible School operated by the Presbyterian mission,⁴ and then affiliated himself with the Disciples mission, where for one year he served as an evangelist.⁵ In 1912, after undergoing a year of indoctrination, he was admitted to the Seventh Day Adventists, was ordained and became one of their most popular preachers, and a teacher in a Bible school operated by the Adventists in Malabon, Rizal. After this stint he left, or was requested to leave, the Adventist group. Directly thereafter he experienced a brief period of doubt during which he completely lost his faith in God.⁶

The period of depression prompted him to engage in an intensive study of Roman Catholic catechisms and Adventists' teachings, comparing their respective positions with the Bible—a study which opened his eyes to "discrepancies" and "inconsistencies" in both.⁷ Then in November 1913 he spent three days in seclusion giving himself to fasting and meditation.⁸ Immediately following this retreat he began his personal preaching mission by expounding the Scriptures to a mere handful of listeners in a small room at the worker's quarters of the Atlantic Gulf and Pacific Company of Manila, Inc.⁹ Soon, however, the meetings were moved out into the open. His first converts, about 12 in number, were baptized early in 1914, in the river at Sta. Ana.¹⁰

The *Iglesia ni Cristo* had its formal beginning on July 27, 1914,

³ Julita Reyes-Sta. Romana, "The Iglesia ni Kristo: A Study," *Journal of East Asiatic Studies* (University of Manila), IV, 3 (1955), 331, 332.

⁴ *Encyclopedia of the Philippines* (Manila, 1950), IX, 393.

⁵ James B. Rodgers, *Forty Years in the Philippines* (New York, 1940), p. 179.

⁶ Teodoro Locsin, *Philippines Free Press*, Feb. 11, 1950.

⁷ Sta. Romana, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁹ Quijano de Manila, *Philippines Free Press*, Apr. 27, 1963, p. 46.

¹⁰ Dolores G. Garcia, *The Sunday Times*, July 26, 1964.

when it was registered with the government. The articles of incorporation state that the head of the society is Felix Manalo, that the objective for which it was formed is "to propagate the doctrines of the Gospel of Christ in the whole Philippine Archipelago, and that its existence will depend upon Public Charity." Its rule and faith was to be the Bible.

In the first few years of the movement the preaching and teaching by Manalo and his associates was confined to the people of Manila and its environs. Then it began to spread to barrios and towns north of Manila. In the years following these early successful efforts, ministers were sent north to Central Luzon, to the Ilocos region, south to Bicol, the Visayas, and to Mindanao. By the time World War II broke out in 1941, groups were found in almost every province of Luzon and in a few of the provinces in eastern Visayas.¹¹ After the war, groups continued to spring into existence, and chapels were erected at a fairly steady pace.¹² In this postwar period until 1963, Felix Manalo constructed the fabulous mansion costing ₱3,000,000 in San Juan, Rizal,¹³ near Manila, and more than 35 concrete church buildings of cathedral-like proportions. One writer has commented that the *Iglesia* chapel in San Juan makes the Manila cathedral of the Roman Catholic Church appear as "a cheap, ungainly house of devotion in spite of its beauty and worth in cement and marble."¹⁴ The chapel in San Francisco del Monte, finished in 1963, one of the most beautiful church structures in the Philippines, seats 3,000 people.¹⁵ The total worth of these structures is estimated at ₱60,000,000.¹⁶

The *Iglesia* has members in Hawaii and on the western coast of the United States. The expansion of the movement outside the Philippines has come about through emigrants moving to these locations overseas.¹⁷ Although the rank and file of its members have been drawn from the masses since World War II, it has also taken into its membership men and women from the professional

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² R. V. Asis, *op. cit.*

¹³ Sta. Romana, *The Sunday Times*, July 31, 1955.

¹⁴ R. V. Asis, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quijano de Manila, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

classes.¹⁸ There has been a steady rise in the literacy rate among the members.¹⁹

Although Eraño Manalo declared in 1963 that the membership of the *Iglesia* was 3,500,000, many informed observers dispute this claim and regard the figure as grossly inflated. The 1960 census registered 270,104 members of the *Iglesia*. The members are concentrated in the greater Manila area, especially in Rizal province.

The political influence of Manalo was widely recognized. Candidates on both the local and national level sought to secure his backing; it is believed that Manalo decided upon a list of candidates to be supported in each election, support which in some in-

The Major Doctrines

The principal doctrine of the *Iglesia* is that Felix Manalo was called as the messenger of God according to the prophecy found in Revelation 7:1-3. The first of three trips made by the executive minister to the United States was in 1919 where it is alleged he attended classes in the study of the Bible for a year at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California.²¹ Two years after his return from the United States he claimed that it was revealed to him that he was the "angel ascending from the east."²²

The passage in Revelation 7 is designated as "heaven's ultimate epistle of salvation to mankind."²³ There is no mention of this passage in the articles of incorporation, filed in 1914, but in the 1948 amended articles, the following sentence was included: "The advent of the Church is in conformity with Biblical proph-

¹⁸ Sta. Romana, *Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Felix M. Caliwag, *op. cit.*

²¹ Sta. Romana, *Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 337. (However, the present head of this school has found no record of his enrollment or attendance there.)

²² *Ibid.*, p. 381.

²³ *Pasugo* (Feb. 1954), p. 41. (*Pasugo* is the official organ of the *Iglesia*.)

ecy, Rev. 7:2-3, Isa. 46:11; 43:6-7." It is explained, quite correctly, that the word "angel" is used in the Bible in two senses, one referring to a heavenly being, the other to an earthly man who is a messenger sent by God to carry out a mission here in the world. The word "angel" does not, it is claimed, designate the nature of this being but his office. Manalo began in 1914 to preach what he felt was "the word of truth" to fulfill this prophecy: "He called with a loud voice to the four angels" (the "Big Four" of World War I: Lloyd George, Wilson, Clemenceau, and Orlando), and with his coministers continued this preaching ministry.²⁴ They believed that this explanation was substantiated by Isaiah 46:11 and 43:6-7, the former of which reads: "Calling a ravenous bird *from the east*, the man that executeth my counsel *from a far country*. . . ." Another passage frequently quoted is Isaiah 24:15,16, "Wherefore glorify ye the Lord in the fires, even the name of the Lord God of Israel in *the isles of the sea*." It is maintained that the Philippines, being a far country, in the East, made up of isles of the sea, is the country alluded to in Scripture.

Another basic tenet is that Jesus Christ founded the church in Jerusalem in 33 A.D., that over the years it became apostate, as was predicted by Jesus and the Apostles, and that the appearance of an "angel" in the Far East in 1914 marked its rebirth. Accordingly, it is believed that the Church of Christ was for many centuries nonexistent, that there was a complete "blackout" of the people of God during a long stretch of history.²⁵ The Roman Catholic Church is charged with fostering this apostasy and as being the very embodiment of this iniquitous movement. It is concluded therefore that the Roman Catholic Church cannot be regarded as the true church, nor can any of the Protestant denominations. The true church is the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. It alone is the embodiment of truth, and outside its walls there is no salvation.²⁶ Various New Testament passages are employed to support this claim, notably Romans 16:16 which, it is taught, is a direct reference to the *Iglesia ni Cristo*.²⁷

A third fundamental and characteristic tenet concerns the

²⁴ *Pasugo* (Mar., 1957; Dec., 1953), p. 52; (May, 1959), p. 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Feb., 1957, p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Aug. 1955, p. 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Apr., 1956, p. 40.

person of Christ. "To the *Church of Christ*, Jesus Christ is a man."²⁸ It is explained that he is not a *mere man* but *the Man*.²⁹ He is designated as Son of Man, Son of God, as Lord, even as Lord of lords.³⁰ He is not God nor can divinity in any form be attributed to him. Both the Incarnation, which is branded as "an atrocious belief,"³¹ and the doctrine of the Trinity are flatly denied.³² He was appointed to be a Savior and does not fill that office by virtue of what he is. His Lordship is not inherent but is an honor conferred on him by God.³³

Factors Contributing to the Growth of the Movement

A number of factors, six of which can be discerned rather clearly, have given impetus and support to the spread of this movement in the Philippines.

First has been the dynamic leadership of Felix Manalo who dominated the movement for a period of forty-nine years. Quite early in his life he manifested eloquence in speech, skill in argument, facility in the use of the Scriptures, and mastery in organization. During the half century of his leadership he exercised sole authority in biblical interpretation, in the ordination of ministers, in the preparation of the outlines for their sermons,³⁴ in the payment of their salaries, in the endorsement of candidates for elective positions in the government of the nation.

When in 1922 he identified himself with the angel of Revelation 7:2, he greatly added to his stature and influence.³⁵ Philippine history indicates that particular honor and trust is given to one who claims to be a religious leader, especially if he shows an interest in the people and maintains that he is sent from God and claims to possess God's truth. It is ironic that although the Spanish priests taught the people to despise the Bible (the Protestant Bible which they mistakenly characterized as being quite different from the Roman Catholic Bible), Filipinos nevertheless have a high regard for one who can freely and impressively quote from it.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb., 1958, p. 38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Nov., 1955, p. 37.

³² *Ibid.*, Jan., 1958, p. 37.

³⁴ Sta. Romana, *Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Feb., 1955, p. 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Oct., 1957, p. 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, May, 1956, p. 39.

The working class who by and large constitute the membership in the *Iglesia* congregations are thought to be readily influenced by an eloquent, knowledgeable, dynamic personality and leader such as was Manalo. It is no doubt correctly reported that from time to time members attempted to kiss his hands and shoes but that he refused this kind of obeisance. For two weeks after his death his body lay in state, first at the plush chapel in San Juan, then at Taguig, his home town, and then in the temple at San Francisco del Monte. Thousands filed past the bier to observe the remains of this great religious leader; many of them, mostly women, were seized with paroxysms of grief, collapsing in violent spasms, writhing and moaning on the floor. Of these many had to be carried away "stiff and cold and unconscious."³⁶ The police estimated that two million people participated in the mammoth funeral procession. Members were seen weeping, wailing, fainting outright, swooning into fits of anguish during the funeral rites which took all of five hours.³⁷ Such was the spell this man had exercised over his humble followers.

A second major element of strength consists in the indigenous nature of the movement. The *Iglesia* came into being through the preaching and the ingenuity of a Filipino. Filipinos have been responsible for its evangelistic activities, its program of religious education, and the administration of all of its affairs. Money for the construction of all of its large and small buildings, the support of its hundreds of ministers, the financial undergirding of its growing operations, comes from the Filipino people. Manalo made his second trip to the United States to solicit contributions for the construction of a spacious main chapel, but he became ill, and it is believed that his mission to raise a minimum of \$300,000 was unsuccessful.³⁸

Tagalog, or some other local language or dialect, is employed in all the preaching and teaching services, thus reaching the innermost core of the common man's heart. The songs rendered by the local choirs are in the vernacular. The official publication,

³⁶ Quijano de Manila, *Philippine Free Press*, Apr. 27, 1964, p. 46.

³⁷ Leticia V. Jimenez, *Manila Bulletin*, Apr. 25, 1963.

³⁸ Sta. Romana, *Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

the *Pasugo*, contains articles mostly written in Tagalog, and occasionally an article or two in another Filipino language or dialect. In order to reach those unfamiliar with Tagalog, an English section has been added in most editions. The writings of Dr. José Rizal, the national hero, are frequently referred to or quoted. The portions quoted, however, usually if not always are polemics against the Roman Catholic friars and the practices of the church of Rome.

The *Iglesia ni Cristo* has come to its present measure of strength riding the crest of the wave of nationalism. This is a period in history when any cause is materially enhanced and greatly buttressed if it is rooted in native soil and nourished by that soil. The *Iglesia* is the largest of the multifarious indigenous religious groups in the Philippines, where neither Protestantism nor Roman Catholicism has yet become truly indigenous in terms of structure and support.

As a third contribution to the growth of the movement, it is apparent that the *Iglesia ni Cristo* meets the need of people for human community. One of man's deepest needs is for community, to be closely associated with people, to work and to worship with others. This need is only partially satisfied by family life. It is more fully met when one becomes an integral part of a larger unit than the family. Today, urbanization and industrialization are definitely undermining the cohesiveness of the Filipino family. Individuals coming from the provinces to a big city such as Manila experience a sense of lostness and loneliness. For these people membership in a "community" meets a crying and growing need. An *Iglesia* congregation often will become the home of a "lonely soul," for here he finds congenial fellowship with people like himself, is given what he regards as a responsible God-appointed task, and enters with others in the common worship of God. These congregations are close-knit, self-contained, and separatist in nature. They are havens which separate and protect the individual from the world with all of its ungodly ways and temptations.

Iglesia members recognize that in the communities of which they are a part and in the nation as a whole, they belong to a minority group. Moreover, because of their adherence to unor-

thodox teachings and practices they undergo ridicule and, they claim, occasional persecution. But they do not appear to be embarrassed by their minority status, and they rejoice in ridicule and "persecution" because they believe they are fulfilling the Scripture, for Christ declared, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The belief that they are members of a group that is reviled—also predicted in Scripture—tends to draw them together into a closer "community."

Another element in this experience of community is the feeling of security that comes in at least two ways: first, with respect to the salvation of their souls, since they are well indoctrinated in the belief that their membership in the *Iglesia* is a guarantee of their salvation; and second, with respect to their securing and maintaining jobs. Members, as a rule, do not belong to the ranks of the unemployed. It is said that contractors make it a practice to go to Manalo or someone else in the church in order to secure a crew of workers, since these men have the reputation of honesty and dependability. Fellow members will help an unemployed member to find a job. A member wishing to start a newspaper business, a poultry or a piggery project, or the like, will be given a small loan.

Their sense of community spirit is further enhanced by their awareness of unity. This feeling of unity undoubtedly was fostered during the years that Brother Manalo served as executive minister of the *Iglesia*. He propounded a simple, brief, understandable set of beliefs to which all subscribed. He instructed "the flock" how to cast their votes in local and national elections. There is no reason to doubt that since Felix Manalo's death this sense of unity continues to be a viable element in the life of the members.

A fourth point is that the *Iglesia* has helped to make members feel important and responsible. It is sometimes stated that the rank and file of the people who come to the *Iglesia* possess normally a feeling of inferiority because of their poverty, their lack of educational advantages, and their subjection to persons of wealth and authority. In becoming a vital part of this movement, however, persons with this mind-set are furnished with various

compensations, a factor which may well attract a sizable number into the *Iglesia* fold.

For example, the high respect and recognition given to Manalo by some government officials and candidates for office would appear to make belonging to the *Iglesia* worthwhile. The late Manuel L. Quezon, president of the Philippine Commonwealth, befriended Manalo, addressing him as "bishop."³⁹ From that time on it became the practice of candidates for the presidency, the vice-presidency, governorships, and others seeking office to cultivate his friendship and court his influence over his people.⁴⁰ The members are proud that "Brother Felix Manalo" mingled with the high and mighty of the land. The fact that these men paid him courtesy and respect, thus acknowledging his leadership and influence over his people, raised the members' morale and helped compensate for their feeling of inferiority.

Again, the construction of expensive and beautiful chapels makes members proud to belong to the *Iglesia*. These buildings, some of which can be called "temples," costing millions of pesos to construct, serve as a compensation for the poverty of the people. They are the symbols of the "success" of the movement and the sign of God's favor. They undoubtedly bring a sense of elation to their members.

Furthermore, members are well instructed in the tenets of their faith and can defend their membership. They are carefully taught the few fundamental tenets which Manalo formulated. They memorize Scriptural verses which they believe confirm their faith. In dealing with nonmembers they can readily quote chapter and verse to "prove" their doctrines. They are, for the most part, expertly skilled in employing verses to point out how the Roman Catholic Church replaced, in the early part of the Christian era, the New Testament Church; how the Roman bishops and priests led the people astray; and how in 1914 Felix Manalo was "used" of God to fulfill Revelation 7:1-3 by reconstituting the "true church" in the Philippines. They have the satisfaction of being able to give a reason for "the faith" that is in them.

Again each member is given an assigned task in an evangelistic

³⁹ Quijano de Manila, *op. cit.*, Apr. 27, 1964, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Sta. Romana, *Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

effort which serves to develop a sense of mission that gives meaning to their lives. Both the men and the women seek with enthusiasm to convert others to the *Iglesia* doctrines and encourage them to join their church. This evangelistic responsibility is given expression by serving on a committee consisting of eight or ten persons.⁴¹ Homes of nonmembers in the community are visited by the committee, and sometimes arrangements are made for participation in meetings held in the open air. Members of this committee share the responsibility of trying to keep other members from becoming indifferent or faithless.

A final compensation is that members believe they are God's elect. In sermon after sermon from their pulpits and in article after article in the *Pasugo* the members are told that they are God's elect because they have entered the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. Members believe that they are entrusted with the most important mission under the sun. They are taught that salvation is their portion, while all outside of the *Iglesia* are condemned to perish in the lake of fire which burns for ever and ever.⁴² As a corollary, it is taught that only those within the *Iglesia* "are given by God the right to serve him. . . ." ⁴³

A fifth factor contributing to the growth of the *Iglesia in Cristo* is what must be considered the religious illiteracy of Roman Catholics ⁴⁴ and Protestants who are too often poorly instructed in their own doctrines. A considerable majority of the Philippine Roman Catholics are woefully uninformed as to the meaning of orthodox Roman Catholicism. This statement has particular relevance to those in the rural areas, where in many places, the people may see a priest only once in a year. Even in the urban areas the instruction received in catechetical classes is often unsatisfactory.

A similar appraisal can be made of some Protestant churches and groups, although in some instances, as might be said with reference to Roman Catholics, the members have a commendable grasp of the essentials of the Christian faith.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

⁴² *Pasugo*, June, 1958, p. 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, June, 1958, p. 40.

⁴⁴ Rev. Manuel P. Alonzo, Jr., *A Historico-Critical Study on the Iglesia ni Cristo* (Manila, 1959), p. 15.

In the Philippines, he who can glibly quote from the Scriptures may quickly and easily gain respect and secure a hearing. The common man is sometimes profoundly impressed when he hears an eloquent preacher, particularly one with little schooling, cite verses which are purported to be the very "words of God." The Roman Catholic will be approached by an *Iglesia* member quoting Bible verses which, it is asserted, refer to faithless and heretical priests and to the apostasy and corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant on the other hand will be told that no Protestant church is referred to in Scripture. *Iglesia* members emphasize the weakness of the Protestant movement by ridiculing the existence of many denominations and sects, and they unfairly or mistakenly declare that the Protestant movement is on the decline in the Philippines.

The *Iglesia* then can marshall verse after verse in dealing with a Roman Catholic or Protestant, selecting verses, which it is asserted, have specific reference to Manalo, to the *Iglesia*, and to the doctrines of that movement. The proof-text method is most effectively employed against people who have only a nominal faith and are at the same time in search of spiritual help and guidance.

Finally, the use of fear to encourage conversion and to threaten expulsion has served in the Philippines as a contribution to the growth of the movement. Articles in the *Pasugo* quite frequently contain statements which seek, through the exploitation of the sense of fear, to convince and convert the reader. Preachers, in open-air meetings, declare to the nonmembers that outside the *Iglesia ni Cristo* there is no salvation. A characteristic statement is the following:

There are those who accept Christ but refuse to enter the *Church of Christ* but you cannot accept Christ and repudiate His church. Likewise you cannot accept the church and abandon Christ.⁴⁵

This same article drives home the point that those not within the *Iglesia* "shall be spurned by the Lord, come judgment day," as is documented by Matthew 7:2-23. And again the member is

⁴⁵ *Pasugo*, Jan., 1958, p. 39.

taught that he "has to make a firm resolve to remain steadfast, for he that is separated will be cast into the lake of fire to be tormented with fire and brimstone, and the smoke of their torment ascended up forever and ever; and they shall have no rest day or night."

Moreover, the threat of expulsion from church membership is held over each member. Reference has already been made to the organization of each congregation into committees of eight or ten, one purpose of which is to keep a watchful eye on members.⁴⁶ Meetings are held weekly at which time the conduct of members is discussed, what they have done or should have done for the church and what they should do the coming week.⁴⁷ Members can be expelled from the *Iglesia* for (1) excessive drinking or gambling; (2) disagreement with the administrative policies; (3) apostasy; (4) marriage outside the church; (5) immorality.⁴⁸

Prospects for Continued Growth

Will the *Iglesia* continue to grow in strength? The indications are that in the immediate future this movement will make gains. Some had predicted that after the death of Felix Manalo the organization would begin to crumble. It is still too early to assess how the demise of its dynamic leader will affect the life of the movement. Eraño Manalo, who succeeded his father as the executive minister, is educated and eloquent, and it is said that he moves easily among the socially elite of the country. Candidates for elective positions court his favor as they did his father's. Eraño is received with warmth and respect as he visits in different parts of the country.

Is there not the likelihood of the *Iglesia's* being splintered now that Brother Felix Manalo no longer exercises his influence? This is possible but perhaps not within the near future.⁴⁹ The *Iglesia*

⁴⁶ Sta. Romana, *Journal of East Asiatic Studies*, op. cit., p. 353.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁴⁹ Dr. Douglas J. Elwood of Silliman University in a research project has discovered at least 4 offshoots from the *Iglesia*, one of the first occurring in 1922, and one as late as 1957. These splinter groups are quite small except for one which claims a membership of 15,000. It would appear that the causes of schism have been both doctrinal and nondoctrinal in nature. See the essay in this volume by Elwood, "Varieties of Christianity in the Philippines," note 28.

is well organized and maintains careful discipline with respect to both its members and ministers. As the young republic continues to pass through an uncertain period of critical economic stress, the working people already attracted to its folds will continue to be attracted. The *Iglesia* provides a needed haven for them in a time of economic uncertainty and fulfills as well a measure of spiritual hunger.

But can a movement built upon indefensible Scriptural interpretations and incredible assertions grow in strength? False ideologies and unorthodox groups in the past and present have and are flourishing, such as Communism and Jehovah's Witnesses. Protestants, and Catholics too, regard Felix Manalo's claim, and the members' unquestioning acceptance of that claim, that he was the fulfillment of Revelation 7:1-3, as an extravagance and a delusion. His success in impressing this interpretation upon his members elevated his own prestige, but put his movement outside the mainstream of historic Christian faith and thereby made it suspect in the eyes of most Protestants and Roman Catholics.

The insistence that from the first century until 1914 the church was nonexistent implies that God's work of salvation suffered an eclipse for nearly twenty centuries. It is an untenable repudiation of the facts of history which regretfully are not readily accessible to the vast majority of the members of the *Iglesia*. Even though many are now literate they do not have, in their own language, ready access to literature which gives a clear account of the history of the church through the ages, during which time the Spirit of God continued the work of salvation. And if books on church history were easily obtainable their contents would undoubtedly be questioned and disputed by the *Iglesia*.

The corollary to the doctrine concerning the eclipse of the Church of Christ is that salvation can be known and experienced only within the *Iglesia*. This teaching is not peculiar to this Philippine religious group, but, like the doctrines above, it is quite untenable and understandably objectionable to the traditional Christian churches.

Nor is the *Iglesia's* Christology unique. It is a form of Arianism which has had followers since the early centuries. Attention is focused on Jesus as "the Man," who is some kind of an intermediate

being, neither God nor man in the full sense, but something in between. It is this concept of Christ that is substituted for the richness and the depth of the New Testament presentation of the Incarnation of Christ, the view generally adhered to by the mainstream Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic.

However, it must be admitted that the language found in the classical creeds in which this doctrine and the related doctrine of the Trinity have been couched is often confusing, if not meaningless, to many people. The terminology in ancient creeds and particularly when these terms undergo translation can become, and sometimes do become, a barrier to the understanding of Christ as he is seen in the New Testament writings. Manalo and the writers in the *Pasugo* freely employ the New Testament designations of Christ but fall short in putting the rich New Testament content and meaning into them. They refer to Christ as the Man, Son of God, Savior, Lord, the Lord of lords, but they refuse to recognize or accept the implications of divinity contained in those terms. We would raise the question: Can the Christian faith exist over an extended period without a strong Christology, one that is firmly rooted in the Scriptures?

The *Iglesia ni Cristo* and its members have been derided, ridiculed, and at times slandered. This has been, in part, an inevitable reaction to the *Iglesia's* vituperative attacks on the Roman Catholic Church⁵⁰ and the extravagance of certain of its doctrines. This attitude and practice, from the Christian standpoint, is indefensible and therefore should lead to repentance. Instead of ridiculing the *Iglesia* and its beliefs, efforts should be made to better understand them, by entering, when possible, into a dialogue with its leaders and members. Adherents of the *Iglesia*, it must be assumed, are earnestly seeking for the fulness of God's truth. The Bible for them is the only rule of faith and practice. God's oneness and Creatorship are recognized, and Jesus Christ is accepted and trusted as Lord and Savior, although in an attenuated sense. The members are well-disciplined churchmen, and they are exemplary citizens of the nation.

These are points of vital contact and mutual concern for discus-

⁵⁰ See Joseph J. Kavanagh, S.J., *Philippine Studies*, IX, 4 (Oct., 1961), 657.

sion with the *Iglesia*. And, obviously, out of any dialogue and discussion, Christians of other traditions may learn some valuable lessons from this body which has become the fastest growing religious movement in the Philippines.